This book reflects the developments that have occurred in the historical writing about French Jewry in the past two generations. Although the history of the Jews of modern France has often been eclipsed by the history of German or Polish Jews, the emergence after World War II of France’s Jewish community as the largest and most vibrant in western and central Europe has stimulated considerable scholarly attention.

I have been interested in French Jewish history since my last year in college, when I wrote my senior thesis on Napoleon and the Jews. In the past thirty years the study of French Jewry has enabled me to hone my skills as a social historian and to reflect on many of the issues that intrigue modern Jewish historians: the impact of state policy on Jewish status, the nature of antisemitism, the choices of Jews in redefining their identity and reforming Judaism, their political ideologies and activism, the experience of immigration. Although I have drawn liberally on the available historical literature, and have pointed out conflicting approaches and conclusions, the interpretation of the history of French Jewry offered here is my own. I am most grateful to David Sorkin, the editor of the series, for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the shape of French Jewish history. Because this general history is aimed at an American public, whenever possible I have made reference to works written in English.
No book is written alone, and I am happy to have this opportunity to thank those who have facilitated my work. A book such as this depends on the scholarship of many other historians, whose names appear in the footnotes. I am grateful for their research even when I dissent from their conclusions. In the years that I have pursued the history of French Jewry, I have also benefited from the assistance of countless archivists and librarians in the United States, France, and Israel, who graciously assisted me in finding relevant information. In particular, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the Jewish Museum, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, and the French Embassy Press and Information Service made available their visual resources.

This book originated in David Sorkin’s idea to create a series on the history of the Jews in different countries. Given the story that it relates, it is a fitting coincidence that the volume on the Jews of France is the first to appear in the series.

Three friends who are also colleagues took time from their busy schedules to read a draft of this book and offer suggestions that have been incorporated into its final version. My former student from whom I have learned so much, Vicki Caron, carefully read each chapter and drew upon her extraordinary expertise to catch errors and to challenge me to sharpen my arguments. Richard Cohen continued our two decades-long conversation on French Jewish history with his wise comments on my manuscript. And I cannot imagine completing a book without the benefit of the keen editorial eye of Deborah Dash Moore.

Finally, the University of California Press has given my work the careful attention that every author desires. It has been my good fortune to work with my editor, Stanley Holwitz, project editor Rachel Berchten, and copy editor Kathleen MacDougall, and it is my pleasure to thank them.

New Haven
February 1998